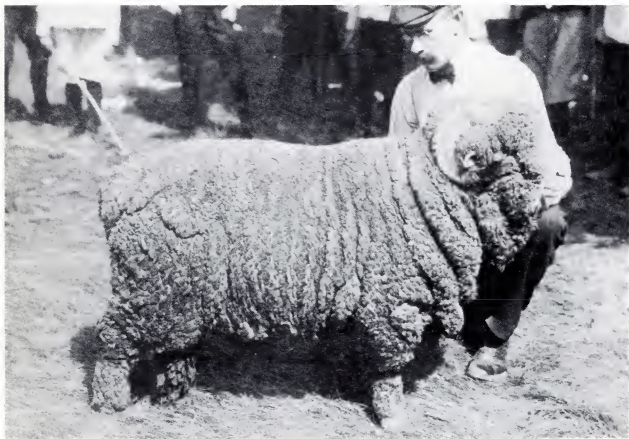


THEY LIT THEIR CIGARS WITH  
FIVE DOLLAR BILLS

-The History of the Merino Sheep Industry-  
-in Addison County-

by Betty Jane Belanus





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## INTRODUCTION

Our county of Addison, Vermont has been an agricultural county from the time the first land was cleared by settlers from Connecticut and Massachusetts in the 1760's, to the present. As our state and country grew, and economic conditions changed, Addison County agriculture kept pace with the times.

During colonial times and even after the Revolutionary War, most Addison County farmers were subsistence farmers, that is they grew, raised and made everything they needed to eat, wear or use. Cash crops, those that they could sell for cash or use for trade or barter, were first potash and lumber and later wheat. Most farmers had a cow or two, some hogs and chickens, and a few sheep.

Sheep were especially important animals on early Addison County farms, for they produced both mutton for food and wool for clothing. The wool was sheared by the farmer in the Spring, and carded, spun and woven into cloth by the wives and daughters (even sons and husbands helped). This homespun cloth was then made into clothing for the family. The clothing was coarse and rough but warm, and we needn't stretch our imaginations to understand that during Addison County winters, warmth was quite enough to keep the settlers happy!

Gradually, as the county, state and country grew, cash crops became more important to buy items that could not be made on the farm. Wheat seemed to be the most profitable crop for Addison



County farmers, and large fields were planted in wheat year after year. When one field would not yield a good crop of wheat anymore, the farmer simply cleared a new field, since land was cheap and plentiful, and the benefits of fertilizer were unknown to most farmers.

Of course, this wasteful use of land could not go on forever and another cash crop had to be found. Both nature and economics conspired to suggest one. During the disturbance that became the War of 1812, the United States barred imported goods from England, the chief supplier of manufactured goods dating from the Revolutionary peace to that time. Forward-looking men in the United States government had been urging Americans to begin their own manufactures for several years, and this ban, or embargo, stimulated American manufactures even more. One of the foremost manufactures was that of woolens. Suddenly, the humble farm sheep took on a new dimension as the basis for a new cash crop. However, when the Peace of Ghent came in 1815, the United States was flooded with British woolens and the great advances towards American woolen manufacturing were stunted.

The period was important for Addison County because it provided a glimpse of the great industry that would be a source of wealth to the area in the future. The wheat crop suffered severe setbacks in the following dozen years. "Cold summers" in 1816 and 1817, attacks of Hessian flies and blights and rusts plagued the county wheat crop and made the raising of wheat unprofitable. In 1827 and 1828 a final blow came to the wheat fields, an insect known as a "wheat midge" which, by 1830, had destroyed most wheat



crops in the county.

The county's salvation, as you must have already guessed was the sheep, but not the common farm sheep of subsistence farming days. The American Woolen industry, which had been revived in the early 1820's, demanded a finer wool than the common sheep had. The sheep of the future was an aristocratic fine-wooled sheep--the Merino sheep.



## CHAPTER ONE: ENTER MERINOS

Sheep, like most Americans, were immigrants to the New World. The first settlers brought their sheep with them on ships from the old country, or bought them from importations from Europe after they had settled here. I have already mentioned the type of early sheep found in America: sturdy, coarse-wooled, common sheep of no special breed, equally useful for wool or meat. In the first decade of the 19th Century, three prominent American diplomats serving posts in Europe grew excited about the kind of sheep they found in Spain and France. Col. David Humphreys, American consul to Spain, William Jarvis, consul to Lisbon, and Robert Livingston, consul to France, realized that these fine-wooled, purebred sheep would be a tremendous asset to American agriculture and manufactures.



An early Merino ram, imported before 1812. From this type of sheep, American breeders created their own type of Merinos over the period 1810-1860.



Humphreys wrote in 1802 to the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture that he was "convinced that this race of sheep, of which I believe not one has been brought to the U.S. . . .might be introduced with great benefit to our country." In that year, Mr. Humphreys brought 21 Merino rams and 70 ewes from Spain to America, and Mr. Livingston brought two pairs of Merinos from France. Actually, a total of seven Merinos had been shipped to America previous to Humphrey's statement. In 1793, Mr. William Foster smuggled into Boston three Merinos and gave them to a friend, Mr. Craigie of Cambridge, who was unaware of their value and slaughtered them for mutton! In 1801, two French gentlemen, Messieurs Dupont de Nemours and Desselert brought four ram lambs, of which only one survived, to land they had purchased in New York State. In 1809, the most significant early importation of Merinos was achieved by Consul Jarvis, who brought in some 4,000 Merinos. In the next few years, several thousand more Merinos came into America.

Why did it take so long and why was it so hard to get Merino sheep to America? Merino sheep in Europe had become the royalty of domestic animals. In Spain, they were kept in pure flocks, or cabanas, owned by rich noblemen and priests and tended with care by trained shepherds. Spain jealously guarded these live treasures, and all the Merinos that had gotten out of the country before 1800 were either given as impressive diplomatic gifts, or smuggled illegally. However, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain in 1808, several of the best flocks were broken up, sold by the nobles for much needed cash, or taken as booty. This made it considerably



easier to get a large number of Merinos out of Spain, and far-sighted Americans jumped to the opportunity.

Merino sheep were not native Spaniards, either. It is generally believed that the Romans had brought them from the region around the Black Sea in Asia Minor, and the name Merino is said to mean "from, or by the sea". This is not a certainty, however. Another account of how Merinos got to Spain says the sheep were brought by Moors in the second half of the 12th Century, from North Africa. The particular Moorish tribe said to have brought the sheep were the Beni-Merines, hence the name "Merino". It is interesting, but not important how the sheep got to Spain. The point is that they made their way to Spain one way or the other and prospered there, as they would in most of their adopted countries. Merinos were hardy sheep. In Spain, the great flocks were called "transhumantes" because, each spring they were driven nearly a thousand miles to the mountains to graze, and in the fall, they were driven back the same distance to their winter quarters. This tradition of hardiness made the Merinos a perfect sheep for Vermont's hill country.

William Jarvis was a Vermonter. This happy coincidence speeded the adoption of Merinos by Vermont farmers. In 1811, Jarvis retired to his Weathersfield, Vermont farm with about 300 Merinos, and spent the rest of his life judiciously breeding the precious animals. As early as 1811, Jarvis's agents brought sheep to various areas of the state for inspection and purchase by local farmers. It is most likely that the first Merinos came into Addison County from the Jarvis flock.





Consul William Jarvis (1785-1870). One writer later said said of him, "None ever excelled him as a public-spirited citizen."

In 1811, Amos W. Barnum of Vergennes, working for a Boston man, T. W. Perkins, Esquire, displayed one Merino ram and fifteen ewes purchased from Jarvis in Vergennes. Some of these were brought by ex-Governor Thomas Chittenden and his brother Truman, who were staying with the Robinson family in Ferrisburg (now known as Rokeby). Rowland T. Robinson recalled, "I do not remember the number, but it could not be many, as the whole were stowed into a common sleigh with three men." The Robinsons themselves went to New York to purchase three Merino ewes and one ram in the same year.

So, the Merino had found its way to Vermont and Addison County before the War of 1812, but not in any large number. The Merino did not catch on in Addison County for quite awhile. But that does not mean prominent men in Addison County were not aware



of the "Merino mania" that blossomed during the War of 1812, when Merino rams brought as much as \$1,000, and their fine wool was up to a dollar a pound. Jonathan Hagar, a Middlebury businessman, received several letters from two gentlemen friends who had moved to Ohio with a flock of purebred Merinos. Hagar's friends, Nathaniel Atkinson and W. J. Peterson wrote in 1813 of their "patriotic and profitable" business, saying "every dollar that is judiciously invested in Merino sheep will give a positive yield of seventy-five per cent."

After the boom created by the war had subsided, more Merinos were brought into the county. Perhaps shrewd Addison County farmers saw the opportunity to buy valuable sheep at low prices--full-blooded Merinos were selling for \$.75-\$1.00 per head in some cases. In 1816, the same year Atkinson and Peterson wrote to Hagar saying sheep and wool had hit rock-bottom prices, Horatio Seymour, Zebulon Frost and Hallet Thorn brought more Merinos into Addison County. By the early 1820's, the nation's wool manufacturers had gotten on their feet again, and the interest in Merinos was becoming significant in Addison County.

As was suggested in the introduction, the beginning of American woollen manufacturing played a large part in the feeling of nationalism and real freedom from Britain. Many men, like Jarvis, Humphreys and Livingston had earlier felt that the trial of independence from foreign manufacturing experienced during the War of 1812 could become a full-time reality. Early in the 1820's, Addison County people read in their newspapers encouraging news of the progress of these manufacturers, and were inspired more and more to



fill the needs of the growing mills and factories by raising more fine wool. Around 1824, such patriotic messages were printed as:

"The notice we have of the rising manufactories of our country relieves us from the conclusion that we shall always be obliged to send to European manufactories for the necessary articles of life."

In 1824, the first important protective tariff in a long series was enacted by Congress. An Addison County man, the Honorable Charles Rich of Shoreham, was a senator in Washington at that time, and had watched and aided in the passage of this tariff carefully. Rich, with Elijah Wright and Jehial Beedle, had brought about 100 full-blooded Merinos from Andrew Cocks of Rhode Island in 1823. This flock would later become one of the most important and well-bred in the County. The passage of the tariff meant a boost for American woolen manufacturing, and Rich was well aware of the benefit it would offer Merino sheep farmers. Writing from Washington to an Addison County friend, Rich described this tariff as "the commencement of a system of legislation for the purpose of protecting the industry of the country". The tariff raised the duties or charges on imported wool and woolen articles.

Congressman Charles Rich (1771-1824). He and his sons "left unto their heirs and land, the goodly heritage of the Rich flock."





As early as the latter 1820's, the influence of Merino blood was being felt in most common flocks in the county. Crossing with Merinos produced a heavier and less coarse fleece. Few pure-blood flocks of any great size existed as yet, but Merinos were no longer looked on as an oddity. In 1844, Silas Jennison, a Shoreham man who had been governor of Vermont said of the latter 1810's:

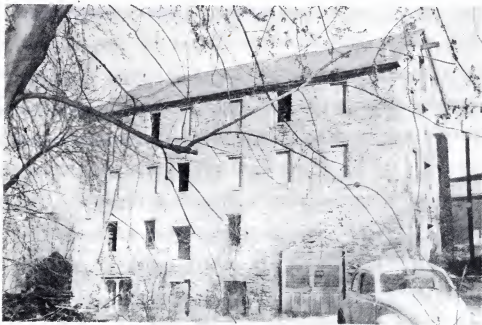
"It is remembered that there was much talk about the new sheep, some approving and others holding it to be a useless innovation."

By the late 1820's, the "useless innovation" had become a respectable and profitable occupation and when Addison County farmers finally realized that, as one local paper said, "Bread-stuffs will hardly pay our farmers for raising them", they answered the question "ought not our Farmers. . .turn their attention to the care of their Sheep and the increase of their Sheep's wool?" with a hearty yes.



## CHAPTER TWO: ADDISON COUNTY LEADS THE NATION

The next period in the history of Addison County Merino sheep was the peak of the wool-growing industry. "Wool-growing" is the term used for raising sheep for the profit of selling their wool. Sheep were sheared in Addison County once a year, usually May or early June, and the fleeces were bought by wool dealers or sold to the local woolen mills which were becoming more prominent in this period.



The Middlebury Mill as it is today. From the mid-1830's, this woolen mill boasted "we use only Addison County wool".

Merinos had become the most profitable sheep in the County by 1830. "A very respectable correspondent" from the Baltimore



Patriot noted in 1825 that "there are many agriculturists in the northern states, more especially Connecticut and Vermont, who annually receive in cash from \$1,000 to \$2,000 from their flocks of Merinos. . . over and above what others have received from the same number of native sheep." The relative profit of fine-wooled sheep led many Addison County sheep raisers to make an unsound choice of sheep--the Saxony Merino. These sheep were imported first around 1824, the same year of the protective tariff, and "Saxony fever" meant nothing but trouble for Merino raisers.

Merinos had been brought from Spain to the Saxon region of Germany in 1765 and bred there to obtain the finest fleece. All other points, particularly heaviness of fleece, were subordinated, and the result was a sheep with the finest and most expensive grade of wool, but a fleece weighing two or at the most four pounds, when regular Merinos sheared at six or eight. However, the Saxonies were well advertised by travelling agents of importers, and demanded by manufacturers. In 1828, a second protective tariff on woolens stirred up even more enthusiasm for Saxony Merinos and, as Rowland T. Robinson put it later, many Addison County fine-wool men "took the fatal disease which put an end to our hopes of success in the line of wool-raising."

Although Saxony wool brought a higher price per pound than regular Merino wool (usually about five cents more), it was not enough to justify keeping the scantily-fleeced animals. Moreover, many frauds were committed by importers, either by selling sheep that were not actually Saxonies, or by selling sheep infected with



the fatal disease foot-rot. Even if all of the Saxonies had been pure and healthy, Col. E. S. Stowell of Cornwall, writing in 1875, explained that there was no large upper class in America in the 1828-1840 period to "covet a wardrobe of the finest texture", and therefore the market for Saxony wool could not last.

Addison County farmers crossed Saxonies into their existing flocks in this period until they realized their mistake. Several flocks, most notably the Rich flock, were kept pure from Saxony blood, but even the Jarvis flock had been largely mixed. A depression in 1837 helped kill off the greed for the finest possible wool, and Addison County sheep men were ready to settle down to the kind of sheep that was to become their specialty--regular or Spanish Merinos.

The number of sheep in Addison County, despite the Saxony business, had increased steadily since the late 1810's, until in 1840 the county could boast the most sheep per acre in the whole nation. The official number was 373 sheep per square mile, or 11-6/100 (11.06) sheep per person. A report on wool just before 1840 reported that the wool from Addison County was "mostly of fine quality, well put up, and in good order".

The decade from 1835-1845 saw the establishment of several fine flocks of pureblood Spanish Merinos. Merrill Bingham from Cornwall bought about 110 Merinos in 1835 or 1836 from men in Massachusetts, which apparently was the largest purebred flock in the County at that time. Prices for Merino rams were low, \$10.00-\$18.00, or up to \$50.00 for "an extra fine one". Other important breeders of this period were Prosper Elithorp, E. R. Robinson,



Charles Rich, Jr., Tyler Stickney (who had, by marriage and purchase, acquired some of the Rich stock) and David and German Cutting, all of Shoreham, and A. L. Bingham (Merrill's brother) of Cornwall and Solomon W. Jewett and L. D. Gregory of Weybridge. Some of these men went to Rhode Island, Connecticut or New Hampshire to purchase their Merinos, others bought them from the existing Addison County flocks.

In 1844, Edwin Hammond of Middlebury established his flock, perhaps the most famous flock of Merinos in history. Hammond purchased his first purebred Spanish Merinos from Steven Atwood of Woodbury, Connecticut. Atwood had kept some of Col. Humphrey's flock intact and had begun breeding his flock "in and in", that is, among related sheep. Hammond originally saw the Atwood sheep in 1841 when Charles B. Cook brought a few to his farm in Charlotte. They reminded Hammond of sheep he had seen in his youth, probably some of the Jarvis flock around 1820, and he became convinced that these sheep were the sheep of the future. From 1844 until his death in 1870, Edwin Hammond did more to breed a true "Vermont" or "American" Merino than any other single sheep man--a sheep that would become so different in appearance and weight of fleece from the original imported Spanish Merino that they were virtually a different breed.

The breeding object foremost in the minds of Merino men of this period was an increase in weight of fleece for the simple reason that the heavier the sheep sheared, the more pounds of wool the farmer would have to sell at shearing time.





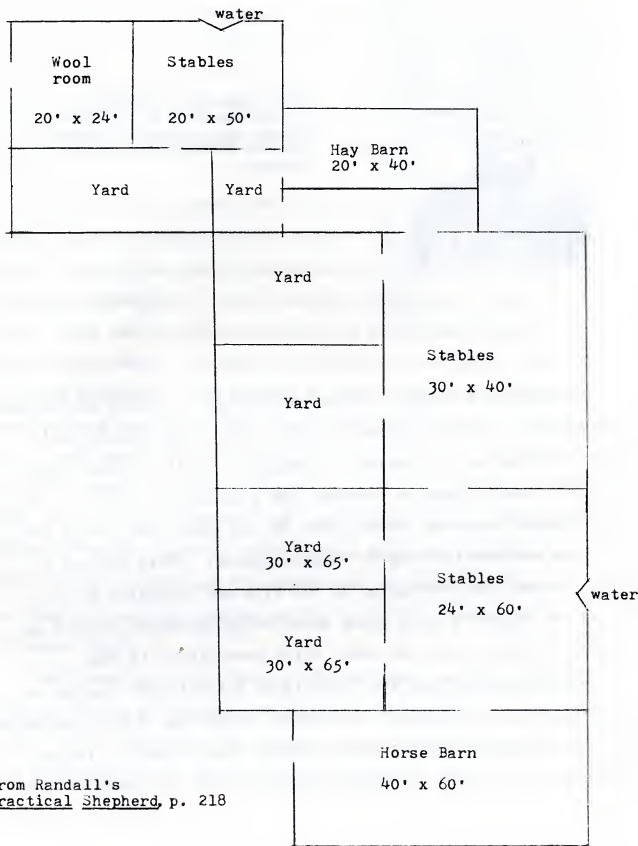
Edwin Hammond (1801-1870), widely renowned as the most famous and successful sheep breeder in Addison County's history.

Shearings were happy affairs, according to Rowland E. Robinson, with "jesting and the telling of merry tales from morning till night, and bursts of laughter". Shearers were the farmers themselves or their neighbors, whoever had acquired the skill. After removed from the sheep, usually all in one piece, the fleece was tied by a man specializing in this technique. After the day's work, a large dinner prepared by the wife and daughters of the family was shared by all, young boys having helped by picking up stray or inferior locks of wool, which were placed in bags.

The wool was either sold locally to mills in the county, or to agents or wool-buyers who travelled through the region purchasing wool for large mills in Southern Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and New York. At least one wool depot, a storehouse and



Edwin Hammond's Barn Plan (circa 1863)  
(not quite to scale)



From Randall's  
Practical Shepherd, p. 218



point of departure for wool to be sold to a specific mill, existed. In 1849, this depot was located at Larrabee's Point in Shoreham owned by a branch of the Kinderhook Woolen Mills in Kinderhook, New York. It offered cash sales and even insurance to the wool grower. Most wool was transported to market by wagon and horse or oxen, or by canal to southern and western markets.

In the 1840's, a few breeders, most notably S. W. Jewett and A. L. Bingham, imported some French Merinos, a larger sheep than the Spanish variety. French Merinos never caught on in this period probably because many gangly cross-breeds were sold as purebreds by unscrupulous dealers and the sheep gained a reputation as a weak, sickly sheep. Solomon W. Jewett, however, believed in the merits of French Merinos and established some fine French flocks in California.



This group of Solomon W. Jewett's Spanish Merinos in 1845 shows the advances in breeding from the earlier sheep.



## THE VERMONT MERINO



The year 1856 marks the year of the birth of the true Vermont or American type Merino, the sheep for which Addison County was most famous. In this year, Edwin Hammond's ram, "Sweepstakes", was born and "there was a truly American Merino". Other breeders followed Hammond's example and bred similar sheep.

The object was an ever-heavier and finer fleece. By 1879 the fineness of the imported Merino's fleece surpassed that of the earlier Saxony Merino, and weight of fleece had increased from an average of 7 to 20% or over, of live body weight. Fleeces as heavy as 30 pounds or over were recorded in the 1879-1900 period, but the amount of body oil secreted, called "yolk", which gave the sheep an almost black appearance, was measured along with the pure wool, so these figures are not quite accurate.

Colonel E. S. Stowell described the Merino's fleece in 1875 as:

"A fleece with a long, strong, lustrous, even, elastic fibre of the utmost quality holding its quality even upon head, flank, legs and belly, compact, and fine to the touch; 'opening like a book' and showing a soft, mellow, pink skin, between the cream tinted and water lined leaves."



Gradually, especially after 1850, the number of sheep in Addison County decreased and wool growing became a dying industry. One of the chief reasons was the establishment of large flocks of Merinos in western states--at this point "the West" being western New York and Ohio, or no further than Michigan. The mostly unsettled West had ranges and plains so much larger than Addison County's fields that sheep were much cheaper to keep in large numbers. The opening of canals and later railroad lines made eastern wool mills more accessible to western sheep men. And so, the industry that had been called the staple of Addison County was on the wane. A lowering of protective tariffs in the early 1840's produced a short but sharp panic in the fine-wool industry, further reducing the importance of Addison County as a wool-growing area.

Breeders with an eye toward the future kept their fine-wool sheep through this period, even if wool prices were plummeting. They foresaw the next phase in the industry, which began around 1850--the exportation of fine Addison County Merinos to points west. By 1859, Dr. Swift commented, "It is the breeding and improvement of the flocks, which is the more appropriate business of the agriculturist."



### CHAPTER THREE: "CALIFORNIA GOLD MINES CAN'T COMPARE

As early as 1843, Addison County Merino men found they could make substantial profits by selling their sheep outside the County. In that year, Rollin J. Jones and S. S. Rockwell of Cornwall took a small flock to Chittenden and Franklin counties. The business later expanded to Rutland, Windsor and the eastern New York State counties of Essex, Franklin and St. Lawrence. The prices were about \$10-15 a head.

Soon, more breeders were getting into the exporting business and before 1850 they had travelled with their sheep to central and western New York State, Ohio and even Michigan. The sheep, according to Smith, were driven to Whitehall, New York or transported there by ferry from points in Addison County such as Frost's Ferry (Bridport) or Larrabee's Point (Shoreham). From Whitehall, they were shipped by canal to their destinations. To get to points west, the sheep were loaded on steamers from Buffalo "before a railroad had been constructed on either side of Lake Erie." Even after railroads had been introduced, canal travel was promoted by prohibition by law of carrying freight on the railroad during the navigation season.

By 1860, it was generally recognized that the breeders of Addison County were among the best in the country. The qualifications of a good breeder, according to the American Stock Journal editor, D. C. Linsley, were "capital, talent, a cultivated intellect, a practised eye, and the healthy stimulant of generous competition."



The capital and competitive parts became one of the "evils" of sheep breeding. Dr. Swift reported in 1859:

"The business of grazing requires large farms to satisfy the ambition of the enterprising; and the large profits have enabled the more wealthy to crowd out the smaller landowners and send them to the West. The result has been, that, in several of the principle agricultural towns, the number of the farmers, and of course of the population has considerably diminished."

The size of a good sheep farm was from 250-500 acres, few farmers exceeding the higher figure unless in partnership with another. While that hardly seems an unreasonable figure to us today, it was much more than a subsistence farmer needed, or for that matter, could bring under cultivation with the meagre farm equipment of the day.

Exportations to California were undertaken by the more adventurous. In this case, the sheep were either shipped to the Isthmus of Panama, driven across that narrow strip of land, then shipped the rest of the way, or else shipped around South America's dangerous Cape Horn to California. Solomon W. Jewett was one Addison County man who decided to spend most of his time in California, although he never renounced his Vermont residency, and wrote often to Addison County friends.

By 1859, Addison County's reputation for fine Merinos was well-established and "acknowledged throughout the Union as first in rank as a stock-breeding county in the nation." In 1863, Addison County Merinos gained world-wide fame by their prize-winning appearance at the Hamburg Exhibition in Germany. By the Civil War period, western dealers were coming to Addison County



themselves to acquire the best Merinos.

The Civil War was the real Golden Age of the Vermont Merino. The four-year period between 1863 and 1867 brought more money to County Merino breeders than any other ten-year period. The reasons are simple. The War stimulated the wool industry by preventing enough cotton for northern needs to be brought from the South. A war ran on clothing and blankets as well as men and their stomachs. The demand for wool caused the great wool growers of the West to flock to Vermont and pay outrageous prices for Merino rams. So many were selling valuable rams that in 1863 the Middlebury Register editor saw fit to warn breeders, "In order to retain the position we now hold we must keep more of our best sheep, especially rams."



One of the beautiful estates  
built before 1875, Col. Edward  
S. Stowell's "Stonehenge".



Rams brought prices as high as \$3,500, and many beautiful homes, barns and outbuildings were built with the proceeds. In 1866, the following list of the acreage and revenues of Cornwall Merino farmers was published in the Middlebury Register with appropriate comments:

"Henry F. Dean	--300 acres, 140 Spanish Merinos, value \$40,000
Hon. Rollin J. Jones	--600 acres, 125 sheep, value \$40,000
F. H. Dean	--350 acres; 150 breeding ewes @ \$500, value \$75,000. Don't doubt it, for he has been offered \$1,000 each for five of them, and \$7,000 last year for a four year old buck, which has since earned him \$4,000. California gold mines can't compare with that.
Merrill Bingham	--400 acres, 300 sheep, valued \$51,000
Simeon S. Rockwell	--300 sheep, valued \$30,000 one of his bucks has netted him over \$20,000 in the last four years
Hon. Joel Randall	--600 acres, 250 sheep. Sold a 2-yr-old buck recently for \$3,000."

Full-blooded Merino rams were so valuable that thieves became a nuisance. Rams also took on almost human characteristics. When Hammond's prized ram, "Gold Drop," died in August of 1865, the Register ran the following obituary:

"Mr. Hammond's best ram, Gold Drop, died. It was valued at \$25,000. This sheep probably had a reputation better than any other sheep that ever lived. He will be sincerely mourned by all sheep breeders at home and abroad."

By 1867, the Civil War wool boom had been spent. Rollin Lane, a Cornwall Merino breeder, explained the whole situation in



eloquent language in a speech given before the State Board of Agriculture in 1879:

"Then came our great national rebellion, when the demand for wool sold at an enormous price, and it did seem as though men went mad, crazy, blind over our Merinos in our little state. Fortunes were made and lost in the sheep business and the inflation of prices of Merino sheep reached a point, which it seemed after the close of the rebellion, from which they fell, and 'the falling was great thereof', and so great that it seemed as though they never could rise again."

Several factors contributed to the great fall in prices and demand. One was the deflation of the currency. The high prices of Vermont Merinos during the war had been paritally misleading due to the buoyancy of the dollar. After the war, a dollar was not worth as much as it had been during the war. Another factor was the great quantity of government clothing left over from the war that caused a "flood" of clothing at low prices. Also, in the year 1867, another higher protective tariff bill was pending and foreign woolen producers poured their goods into the United States to avoid paying higher duties when the tariff became effective. The price of wool dropped dramatically from a dollar a pound to twenty cents or lower, and many fine County Merinos were neglected or killed for the value of their pelts and for tallow, their owners unable to care for them properly or pay for their keep.

Overproduction and over-investment in machinery in the woolen industry had drastic results that were felt for nearly ten years after the crash in '67. A national depression in 1873, known as the Panic of 1873 added to the seriousness of the depressed period.



Wool men had great hopes for the tariff of 1867. They had fought hard for it, wool-growers, sheep breeders and woolen manufacturers joining forces to influence Congress and push the bill through. However, it was the Centennial Year, 1876, before the woolen industry got back on its feet again. When it did, Vermont Merinos were rediscovered, their reputation restored, and the great Vermont Merino revival began.



#### CHAPTER FOUR: PRESERVATION AND SPECULATION

The most determined of the Addison County Merino sheep breeders were discouraged but not defeated by the great "crash" of 1867-1875. These men saw the period as a time to sort out or cull the sheep in their flocks, keeping the very best and selling the less valuable for what they could get, which wasn't much. Many former sheep men turned to dairying in this period. At this time, because of lack of refrigeration, the building of railroads had made it easier for dairy products, butter and cheese to be shipped to market. Although a sheep revival was in the near future, a solid foundation for the switch from sheep raising to dairying as the main industry of the County was laid in this period.

Devoted Merino breeders were shocked by the number of good Merinos leaving the County or not being taken care of properly, but didn't have much time to do anything about it because of the upheaval of their personal businesses until the mid 1870's. In 1876, a group of Merino breeders formed an organization called the Vermont Merino Sheep Breeders Association (VMSBA). Most of the men in this organization had been Merino breeders before the Civil War broke out and were now respected middle-aged gentlemen. Their views were conservative and they had a genuine desire to preserve the reputation of Vermont Merinos. To do so, they set up a complicated system of pedigrees and required members to



register their sheep by number and report all sales to the Association. They also opened membership to those outside the County and State and served as the model for other Merino associations across the country.



Merinos were often given patriotic names. This one was named after our 20th President, James A. Garfield.

The first Register of the Association, a leather-bound volume of over 400 pages, was published in 1879. It was hailed in the Vermont Watchman by a Dr. Hoskins with the following:

"There can be no doubt that this work, so carefully done, will have a powerful effect upon the sheep and wool industry for good, and secure to Vermont and America the just reward of past, present and future skill and care in this direction."

However, a Dr. Sturtevant writing in the Scientific Farmer commented about the Register:

". . .the absence of authenticated records has involved a certain amount of assumption which seems carefully separated from history."



In fact, the writers of the Register admitted later that the history of the origin and bloodlines of Merinos in the County was so "enshrouded in such a contradictory mass of neighborhood tradition and local theories. . . that the task of unravelling the mysteries seemed at times a hopeless one, and in a few cases has thus far proved impossible." The men who put the first and the following three Registers together were not historians, but they did a reasonably good job of patching together the history of the industry, although their version is prejudiced and in some cases downright inaccurate.



The haughtiness of the VMSBA was often scorned by satirists. Rowland E. Robinson sketched this cartoon, ridiculing prizes given "prime" Merinos at local fairs for the simple reason that their owners were rich and prominent citizens.

The revival of interest in Vermont Merinos was in full swing from 1879-1883. The Middlebury Register began a regular sheep column, where sales of registered sheep were listed and articles



of interest to sheep breeders were printed. A typical article, by a western breeder reported:

"The coming prosperity of the country and the certain demand for Vermont sheep, at handsome prices, will bring all the experience of the past, and skill of the Merinos breeders, and scientific knowledge of the laws of breeding Merino sheep into the business. The flocks of the United States owe everything to Vermont."

In 1881 alone, 6,777 sheep were reportedly shipped by rail from Middlebury to the West as follows:

2,284	to Ohio
1,728	to Texas
1,230	to Michigan
662	to Kansas
303	to Pennsylvania
268	to Missouri
106	to Maine
134	to Colorado
57	to Illinois

A valuable source of information published that year was Child's Gazetteer of Addison County, a business directory with advertisements, lists of residents and their occupations, and a brief history. Merino sheep breeding and dealing was the most advertised and prevalent industry. The leading Merino sheep towns were Cornwall with 89 breeders and dealers listed, and Shoreham with 76, followed by Bridport with 49, Middlebury with 39, Addison with 33, and Orwell with 32. Dealing became as large and profitable a business as raising.

Visitors from the West were heartily greeted by Addison County Merino farmers. One man from Michigan found them "good, whole-souled fellows; want a fellow to come right in, make himself at home and stay a week". In 1882, the first public shearing of the sheep breeding Association was held at the Middlebury fair-



grounds. Shearing was done much earlier in this period "before the swallows" as a skeptical Rowland E. Robinson put it, usually in early April. The modern public shearings according to Robinson were "celebrated in local papers (but) I doubt if they are such hearty and enjoyable seasons as the old-fashioned shearings were."



Merino weathervanes were popular. Made of zinc and sheet iron, they sold for \$35-50 and were installed on the top of barns for all to see.

In 1882, nearly 1,000 more Merinos were shipped from Middlebury, it was reported at the annual January meeting of the VMSBA. Talk of tariff revisions in Washington had some breeders worried. In fact, a needed general tariff reduction came in 1883 due to surpluses in the Treasury accumulated by the high duties imposed by the 1867 tariff. Sheep men saw this reduction as a personal insult, and the cause of a business depression that plagued the years 1883-86. Actually, the tariff had little to



do with the depression.

The years 1883-1887 were again sad ones for sheep men. The third volume of the VMSBA reported in 1887:

"The period of four years that has elapsed since the publication of the Second Volume of the Register of this Association, has been one of severe and discouraging depression for Wool Growers and Sheep Breeders in the United States, and little calculated to stimulate breeders to make improvements in their flocks, or to give them that care, feed and attention that is necessary to properly develop and exhibit the improvements that have been made."

When H. D. Smith in his 1886 History of Addison County predicted that the County sheep breeders "need not fear the approach of stagnant markets", he was not being realistic. After the depression of 1883-87, the Merino industry never came back with the gusto it had after the '67 crash. There was much talk and optimism, but in fact the industry continued to be displaced by dairying. Members of the VMSBA, most of them approaching old age by the 1890's, refused to give up their sheep or their belief that Merinos were the most profitable and honorable of domestic animals. Younger men, such as the Secretary of the Addison County Agricultural Society, cautiously expressed another opinion. Speaking about premiums awarded at the annual County Fair, Secretary Frank C. Dwyer said in 1892:

"Premiums on Merino sheep could certainly stand a big reduction. I know I am stepping on dangerous ground to advocate anything seemingly detrimental to Merino sheep right here in Addison County, but I am going to say what I think just the same. It is useless to repeat that the interest in them is dying out. Everyone knows that it is. . ."



By 1899, Ira Hamblin, a respected breeder from Cornwall, wrote to a friend who had enquired whether anyone of Hamblin's acquaintance had any dairy stock for sale, "We have more than 10 men here engaged in dairying to where you find one in the fine-wooled sheep business. Dairying is 1st in Vermont." Besides the dairying interests, members of the VMSBA were annoyed by younger men advocating a different kind of Merino or other sheep that were suitable for mutton as well as wool.



Addison County illustrator, F. L. Webster, drew this group of Merinos. His brother, L. A. Webster, was also a famous livestock artist. Drawings and woodcuts were preferable to photographs, since photos told no lies.

The Vermont Merino, a small, round sheep, was never the best sheep for meat. In fact, one 1857 anecdote told of the foolhardiness of stealing a Merino for meat: ". . .if you bring home one of these little Merino sheep you might as well have a tin lantern to eat." In the early 1890's, a young man named George



Dimmock from Cornwall challenged the members of the VMSBA to a newspaper duel. Dimmock raised and sold the larger French Merino, a better mutton and comparable fine-wool sheep. The VMSBA members scorned this type of sheep, so different from the pedigreed, small, wrinkly Vermont Merino, especially since the experiment in the 1840's and 50's with French Merinos had been unsuccessful. Dimmock and his friends could not convince the VMSBA that this sheep was more than practical and for several months, bitter words were exchanged between the two sides in the Middlebury Register's sheep column. However, Dimmock had a point when he commented that the Association should "encourage men to breed sheep, not mythical pedigrees", and "act once more in real life and breed a Merino sheep that the trade demands and is worthy the name."

One hope for the Vermont Merino breeders in the twilight years of their industry was the overseas trade. While western American markets were demanding a less wrinkly, more hearty sheep, able to "rustle" on the open range better than the high-bred (often overbred) Vermont Merino, South African, South American and Australian markets still demanded, to some extent, the famous heavy-fleeced sheep. From 1877 to the first decade of the twentieth Century, Merino breeders and dealers willing to go "half seasoever" to peddle their purebred sheep made a decent profit, and experienced the excitement and interest of visiting cultures very different from that of Addison County.



## CHAPTER FIVE: HALF-SEAS OVER

The exportation of Merinos to South Africa, South America and Australia is a legendary Addison County business. Since this phase of the industry occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many older County residents remember relatives or neighbors who sent their sheep abroad or travelled with the sheep. Travel to these far-away places naturally produced many fascinating stories, perhaps not all of them true. In any case, the story of the men who sold Vermont Merinos in South America, South Africa and Australia is one of the most romantic parts of the history of the industry.

Like the American West of the mid-1800's, these three areas were large, mostly unsettled and open. South Africa was in the possession of Dutch descendants called the Boers, but the English had their eye on the rich territory. Australia was under the British Commonwealth and was just beginning to form nationalist feelings.

The South American countries Addison County sheep dealers did business with were Argentina and Uruguay and perhaps a few more, all under their own governments and Spanish-speaking. Language never seemed to hinder business deals, however.

The market for wrinkly Vermont Merinos in these areas was perhaps due to their excellent reputation and their ability to improve the shearing weight and quality of native sheep. The



condition of sheep in these territories was, in general, poor and the proven formula of "frequent infusions" of Vermont Merino blood seemed like a good cure. However, the novelty of the small, wrinkly sheep could have had a lot to do with their appeal also. No doubt Vermont Merinos helped improve the poorer flocks of South Africa, South America, and Australia, but to what extent is an arguable point. It is certain, however, that although a decent profit was made from these exportations, the fabulous sums claimed by some remembering them today are polite exaggerations. Ira Hamblin wrote to one South African friend that the going prices for his rams in 1899 were \$24-30 for a plain ewe, \$50 for a fancy one, \$50-100 for a ram, and up to \$500 for a fancy ram "suited for Australia".

Ocean steamer was the regular means of transportation to and from the three territories. The animals were shipped from Montreal, Boston or New York and sometimes those headed for Australia were sent by train to the West Coast and shipped from there. Estimated costs for such a trip involving 173 sheep in 1883 was "\$3,000 freight from Vermont to San Francisco, \$15 per head from there to Australia, \$32.25 average per head per sheep total cost, average price received, above cost of transportation, \$140.00 a head".

The market in Australia and South Africa seems to have shifted as rapidly and frequently as that of the United States, and it is next to impossible to sort out its fluctuations. The Australian and South African markets opened first, followed by the South American market. Trips to South America were made as late as the



1910's, but by World War I, the exportations from Vermont ceased.



Robert Cartmell, one member of an exporting partnership formed to send Merinos to South Africa.

An excellent account of one exporter, Carlton Sprague of Waltham, was given by his son, D. O. Sprague of Chester, in 1873. The elder Sprague made several trips to South Africa and his experiences were interesting and fairly typical of exporters in general. Mr. Sprague made his first trip in 1877. He had been approached by Judson Wright and Robert Cartmell, "men of substance" from Middlebury who had heard of the profits to be gained by such exportations and needed a good man to go with the sheep they planned to export. On his first trip, Mr. Sprague was gone ten months. Communications were so poor that Wright and Cartmell had no idea whether Mr. Sprague was making a go of it and did not make preparations for another exportation until Mr. Sprague returned.

Mr. Sprague formed a partnership with Wright and Cartmell that lasted twelve years. The deal was the following: Wright and Cartmell furnished the sheep and Mr. Sprague's expenses, and the



profits were split three ways. Later, Sprague joined in a partnership with Carl Church of Whiting. Sprague travelled to South America as well as South Africa. To market his sheep in South Africa, Sprague had a special wagon built after the design of the wagons used by earlier Vermont Merino men in the American West that allowed the sheep to poke their heads to either side. He sold mostly to the Boers, polite farm people he admired immensely.

Without the modern travelling necessities such as passports, Mr. Sprague found an American must prove his nationality by other means. Proof became the ownership of such uniquely American items as claw hammers and oil lanterns. Once, during the Boer War (a War fought in 1899-1902 between the English and the Boers), Mr. Sprague's safety relied on his proof of American citizenship. Luckily he had a small American flag with him on this occasion. It usually took Mr. Sprague 2-3 months to dispose of 60-90 head of sheep. Stock shows and visits to individual ranchers accounted for most sales. During the parts of the year the Boers had little cash, they gave Mr. Sprague bank notes for which he was later sent money. Although this system was one requiring a great deal of trust, Mr. Sprague claimed he "never lost a dollar".

Once, while in South America, Mr. Sprague met up with a man named William Clark from Australia, who was selling some of his sheep also. As it turned out, this Mr. Clark was originally from Addison County! He had left his home in Addison at an early age and gone to Australia, bought a ranch and became a successful sheep raiser. Sprague and Clark later travelled together by



riberboat to Uruguay to check out the market for sheep there.

Mr. Sprague's later trips in the early 1900's were not as successful as his earlier trips. From about 1906 on, not enough quality Merinos were left in Vermont to export and Sprague had to get the sheep from as far as Ohio, Iowa and Illinois. The money market around World War I was so poor that it ended the exportation of Vermont Merinos altogether. Mr. Sprague made his last trip in 1914.

Judge Stuart Witherell of Cornwall also remembers his father, Charles Witherell, and grandfather, Stowell Witherell, and their stories of travels to South Africa with their sheep. During one trip, they supposedly met up with a young newspaper reporter from the London Times who wrote a story about their sheep which led to several legislative members buying Merinos. When Mr. Witherell inquired about the young reporter, wanting to thank him, he found out his name was Winston Churchill!

Both D. O. Sprague and Judge Witherell relate stories of fires on the steamers in which their relatives were taking sheep to Africa. Ira Hamblin, who also made a few trips to South Africa, wrote of a similar fire in a letter dated 1940. Apparently such fires were not uncommon and were caused by careless handling of lanterns or spontaneous combustion of hay aboard. The men usually escaped in lifeboats, but the sheep and other stock were lost. Mr. Hamblin remembered spending eighteen hours in a lifeboat, the steamer having burned 400 miles from land.





Charles Witherell and a group of his rams,  
around 1920, after the importation to South  
Africa had ceased.

George Dimmock also travelled to South Africa. Some of his  
expense records, kept by his son Burton, reveal the sort of equip-  
ment and costs there were preparing sheep for shipping abroad:

"Money Paid out for Wright and Cartmell and Cook  
by B. B. Dimmock in getting off shipment of  
Sept. 1907 from Montreal

Sept. 19, '07	-	car fare - 30¢
20	-	telephoning 3 messages - 30¢
20	-	tram tickets - 50¢
20	-	help - \$1.00
20	-	white ducking for curtains for 6 crates - \$2.80



21	-	water dishes - 1/2 dozen - \$1.33
21	-	wire cutter and rake - .42
21	-	burnt umber and drop black - .18
21	-	white vitriol - .10
21	-	sheep dip - .50
21	-	trolley tickets - .13
21	-	1 grain measure - .10
22	-	saw - .20, rasp - .15"

The Dimmocks also took out insurance on their sheep, in one case \$4,500 on 52 sheep.

Addison County exporters sometimes ran into trouble with quarantines. The territories would not allow sheep in when danger of epidemics of hoof and mouth disease were running through the countries. Great precautions, including shearing the sheep before shipping and disinfecting them, were taken. Mrs. Agnes Ketcham of Vergennes remembers her father shearing sheep around 1895 for some Cornwall Merino breeders who were going out of the business and selling their sheep to Australians. It took a knack to shear the wrinkles of the Vermont Merino and it was impossible to use power shears. Those without the knack remember the frustrating experience of trying. Mr. George Willmarth of Addison says it was "hard work".

South Africa and Australia soon became the wool centers of the world, a position still held by Australia and its neighbor, New Zealand. Mrs. Ketcham has travelled to Australia and was thrilled to see the huge numbers of sheep, some perhaps the descendants of the ones her father had sheared. As in America, the Vermont Merino eventually fell out of favor with the breeders abroad. But Addison County should be proud of the fact that their



once-famous sheep travelled so far and impressed so many during their hey-day.



J.C.S. Hamilton, a late Bridport Merino breeder, with a young ram, around 1910-1920.



## EPILOGUE: THE END AND A NEW BEGINNING

The last Vermont Merinos to leave Addison County were the flock of John Q. Stickney of Whiting. Harold Webster, presently Whiting's town clerk and historian, went with the sheep to Ohio, in the year 1949. Today the Vermont-type Merino is very rare and, in fact, no one in Vermont has any. Merinos today have few wrinkles and a much smaller amount of yolk.



J. Q. Stickney's house in Orwell. This lovely house was built with "sheep money".

No one factor led to the economic downfall of the Vermont Merino in Addison County. The rise of the dairying industry, especially after the fluid milk industry began, was one reason. The demand for a mutton sheep as well as a wool sheep was another. The substitution of cotton and synthetics for woolens is still



another. Political reasons were always popular with members of the VMSBA. The second Cleveland administration (1892-1896) and the rate of the silver exchange during this time are often cited, and the fact that wool was put on the free list (no tariff duties charged on foreign imported wool) from 1894-1897. The restoration of a Republican administration with McKinley in 1896 did not significantly change the wool market, however, or at least not enough to save the failing Vermont Merino market.

In 1908, L. A. Webster wrote in an article for the Vermont magazine that although there were "less than 20 prominent flocks" left in Addison County "yet these few flocks contain the best blood and best breeding in America". Webster was optimistic, saying:

"What Vermont needs today is young men shepherds--born--not made--men of zeal and unconquerable energy, men whose ambition and purpose is the development of the best, the ideal Merino, and they will follow him with the golden hoof through the years to come as they have down the ages."

However, there were few young men interested in reviving the dying industry, since there was not much hope of turning a profit in it. By 1917, Ira Hamblin could only get \$50.00 for three Merino ewes, and refused to sell a purebred ram for \$20.00.

In 1973, Mr. Frank Kelley of Cornwall purchased three Merino ewes in Pennsylvania. These Merinos are not of the old Vermont type and therefore are not considered to be real Merinos by older county residents. However, they are Merinos. Now, the Kelleys have about 50 Merinos, and some of the flock is also



owned by the Selbys of Bridport. These two families hope to begin the Merino industry in a small way again in Addison County out of a nostalgic interest in the county's historic once-important industry. Mr. Kelley has tried very hard to locate some of the Stickney flock in Ohio, but so far has been unsuccessful.



A group of modern Merinos (all but dark ram at extreme left), owned by the Cleland Selby's of Bridport.

The heritage of an industry that lasted for a century is hard to deny. Although the Merino sheep industry will never be an economically feasible alternative to the industries prevalent in the County today, the memory of Merino deserves to live on.



Group of mixed-breed sheep owned by Hester Phelps of Orwell graze on land once used by famous Addison County Merinos.



These pictures, reproduced from an old (1875) atlas, show some beautiful estates:



Estate of Samuel James, Weybridge



View of Middlebury



Estates



Estate of D. B. Buell  
See next page for modern  
view of left-hand barn



Estate of Milo Williamson  
See next page for modern  
view of barns.



Several Merino barns still stand throughout Addison County:



William R. Sanford barn  
Orwell



Milo Williamson barn  
Orwell



Old J.C.S. Hamilton barn  
Bridport



D. B. Buell barn  
Orwell



## Books to See

--For more information on Merino sheep or the history of nineteenth century Addison County, the following books are very good.

### General Histories of Addison County and the Sheep Industry

Child's Gazetteer of Addison County (1881), Middlebury Public Library (Ilsley), Vergennes Public Library (Bixby)

Smith, H. P., History of Addison County (1886), Ilsley, Bixby, Sheldon Museum Library

Swift, Samuel, History of Middlebury and Addison County (1859), Ilsley, Bixby, Sheldon

### Wheat to Wool, Wool Growing

Robinson, Rowland E., "The American Merino", article in Century Magazine, Vol 27, pages 513-522, February, 1884; Middlebury College Library

Swift, Samuel, History of Middlebury, (see above)

Wilson, Harold F., Hill Country of New England (1936), Bixby

### Exporting to West and Beyond

Sanford, Beulah, Two Centuries of Cornwall Life (1962), Bixby, Ilsley

Smith, H. P., History of Addison County, (see above)

### Breeders and Breeding, Dealers

Child's Gazetteer, (see above)

Annual Reports of the Vermont Board of Agriculture, Manufacturing and Mining (1873-1902), Special Collections, Middlebury College Library

Registers of the Vermont Merino Sheep Breeders Association, four volumes, Sheldon Museum, Orwell Free Library, Bixby



## Towns

The following town histories have been published within the last year and are available at town historical societies or from their authors:

Bridport Historical Society, There's Only One Bridport

Clark, Irwin S., The Town of Addison

Webster, Harold and Elizabeth, Our Whiting

## Other Town Histories

Goodhue, Josiah, History of Shoreham (1861), Bixby, Sheldon, Shoreham Town Library

Bishop, Doris (editor), Orwell, 1763-1963, Orwell Free Library

Matthews, Rev. Lyman, History of Cornwall (1862), Orwell Free Library, Bixby

Sanford, Beulah, Two Centuries of Cornwall Life, (see above)

Smith, History of Addison County

Swift, History of Middlebury

## Day-by-Day Sheep Interests

Two newspapers are the best for this purpose:

The Middlebury Galaxy, later the Middlebury Register, bound, Sheldon Museum Library

The Vergennes Vermonter, microfilm, Bixby Library



## CHRONOLOGY

-List of important events effecting the Merino sheep industry-

1793- First Merinos reach America

1801-2- A few more Merinos arrive

1808- Napoleon invades Spain

1809- Consul Jarvis's major importation

1812- War of 1812; embargos

1815- Peace of Ghent, flooding of market with foreign products

1824- First major protective tariff

1824-35- "Saxony Fever"

1828- Second major protective tariff

1837- Panic of 1837

1840- Census lists Addison County as chief sheep-raising county

1842- Unfavorable tariff produces short panic

1843- Jones and Rockwell begin exporting to near West

1846- More favorable tariff

1856- Hammond breeds "Sweepstakes," first true Vermont-type

1857- Panic of 1857

1860- First Vermont Merinos shipped to California

1861- Civil War breaks out

1863- Vermont Merinos win prizes at Hamburg, Germany exhibition

1866- Civil War ends

1867- Crash becomes evident; new protective tariff bill passed

1873- Panic of 1873

1876- Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia; VMSPA formed

1877- First exportation of Vermont Merinos to South Africa



1879- First register of VMSBA published  
1879-1883- Second Vermont Merino "Mania"  
1881- Child's Gazetteer published  
1883-1886- Business depression  
1883- Lowering of protective tariff  
1893- Depression of 1893; Chicago World Columbian Exhibition  
1894- Wool put on free tariff list  
1899-1902- Boer War  
1909- VMSBA merges with New York and Ohio MSB Associations  
1914-1917- World War I  
1949- Last Vermont Merinos leave Addison County  
1973- Merinos brought to Cornwall by Frank Kelley



## Historic Calendar of Merino Sheep Farmer's Year

--the duties performed or supervised by Addison County Merino raisers--

January - Annual meeting of VMSBA 1876-1909, third Wednesday of month, in Middlebury. Sheep kept in barns, fed roots and dry hay.

February - March - Sheep kept in barns

April - Lambs born and sheep sheared in later period (1875-1910), public shearings held in 1880's first week in April. Sheep put to lowland pastures as soon as snow is gone.

May - Lambs born and sheep sheared in earlier period, late May or early June. Sheep in pastures, farmers keep fences up and sheep safe from dogs and coyotes, from now to winter boarding. Plant root crops.

June - The same. First haying depending on crop.

July and August - Sheep move to higher pastures to escape heat. Second cutting of hay.

September - Sheep move back down to lowlands. Cull sheep and choose show animals for Middlebury Fair. Western men come to choose sheep during Fall, Civil War period. Agriculture Society meets annually in Middlebury.

October - First week, Middlebury Fair.

November - December - Put sheep in barns after snow falls.



## CREDITS

### Pictures:

Cover: Unknown subject showing a Merino sheep, circa. 1920; frontispiece, courtesy Orwell Free Library; pages 4, 7, 9, 15, 17, 18, 27 and 36, courtesy Sheldon Museum; pages 28 and 32, courtesy Rowland E. Robinson Memorial Association, Rokeby Museum; pages 22, 45 and 46, courtesy Orwell Free Library; page 18, courtesy the Valley Voice; page 41, courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Carl Peterson, page 39, courtesy Mr. Sanford Witherell; page 30, courtesy the Shelburne Museum.

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Title quote from Mr. Rufus Jewett, Cornwall, Vermont.